United Nations A/HRC/25/NGO/168

General Assembly

Distr.: General
5 March 2014

English only

Human Rights Council
Twenty-fifth session
Agenda item 4
Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Joint written statement* submitted by Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 February 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

GE.14-11796
1411796

Please recycle

Grave and ongoing violations of women's rights in the context of the conflict in Syria*

For the past three years, large-scale human rights violations and international crimes have been perpetrated in Syria, resulting in massive suffering among the civilian population. The particular ways in which these abuses have severely impacted the lives of Syrian women demand serious attention.[1] Significant challenges face efforts to document and draw attention to violations against women in Syria, and the prevailing climate of impunity facilitates the recurrence of such crimes. A lack of resources also limits efforts by Syrian civil society groups and international stakeholders to provide women affected by such abuses with adequate support.

The large-scale campaign of systematic repression carried out by governmental security forces against the peaceful protest movement in 2011 marked a major escalation of patterns of grave human rights violations in the country, including arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, widespread torture, and extrajudicial killings.[2] As the situation in Syria evolved into an internal armed conflict,[3] a number of other parties to the conflict also started committing serious violations of international humanitarian law.

Syrian women are not only victims of the conflict, they have increasingly become war targets and have been used as weapons of war in violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and international principles in relation to protection of women in times of conflict.[4]

The number of persons killed in Syria since 2011 is estimated by the United Nations to be over 100,000[5], including more than 10,000[6] women, over 3,000 of whom are under the age of 18. Killings have mainly occurred during indiscriminate or deliberate shelling, Scud missile attacks, and due to the use of heavy artillery and snipers.

The documented violations to international humanitarian law (IHL) in Syria include the more than 450 cases documented by Syrian human rights groups in which women have been deliberately shot by government snipers; the killings of at least 1,300 women who have died in mass killings carried out in several areas of the country, notably in Houla (June 2011) and during the chemical attack on the outskirts of Damascus (August 2013); and the use of women as human shields during military operations.

Data gathered by Syrian human rights organizations between July 15, 2012 and January 31, 2014 highlights that civilians constituted the majority of deaths during military operations, with women making up an estimated 10% of these casualties. This points to an indiscriminate use of force by governmental forces against civilian-populated areas and evidences a policy of collective punishment, in clear violation of IHL.

Syrian women have been increasingly exposed to arbitrary detention, particularly by government security forces but also due to the increased incidence of abductions in the country. As of February 2014, it has been documented that more than 750 women are detained in prisons and detention facilities run by the Syrian authorities,[7] including a significant number of girls under the age of 18. In addition, Syrian human rights groups increasingly report abductions of women by non-state actors, generally for ransom or prisoner exchanges. Since June 2013, the armed jihadist group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) has kidnapped at least 2,500 people, including a number of women.[8]

---

[1] *See* written intervention to Human Rights Council June 2013 *Grave and ongoing violations of women's rights in the context of the conflict in Syria* submitted by CIHRS and EMHRN and 11 Syrian Human Rights Groups.

[2] *See* Report of the UN independent Fact Finding Mission on Syria (August 2011).

[3] In June 2012, the ICRC stated that the situation Syria presents constitutive elements of non-international armed conflict.

[4] *See* UN security resolutions 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), and 1960 (2010).

[5] *See* UN Secretary General statement, 25 June 2013.

[6] *See* Statistics included in this document were provided by the VDC and the SNHR.

[7] As documented by the Violations Documentation Center (VDC)

[8] *See* SNHR report *Islamic State of Iraq and Levant Organization (ISIL)* February 2014

The conditions in government-run detention facilities are appalling. Physical and psychological torture is reportedly practiced routinely against female detainees, and at least 30 women have died under torture in government detention facilities. Detainees, including those in need of medical care and/or with chronic illnesses, are held in unsanitary conditions and denied appropriate medical care.

While state authorities systematically deny that women are detained in security branches, testimonies indicate otherwise. Women transferred to the "Adra" central prison in Damascus are routinely subjected to physical abuses and solitary confinement and exposed to various forms of ill treatment, including by denying them proper food, clothing, and heat and electricity. Pregnant women and women with small children have been detained by the Syrian government.

Since July 2012, the Syrian government has used exceptional anti-terrorism military courts to prosecute peaceful activists, including at least 340 women, among them a number of girls under the age of 18. It is believed that the actual number of women prosecuted before this court is much higher, but no comprehensive data is available due to the difficulties in accessing such information.

In a number of cases, arbitrary arrests and kidnappings turn into enforced disappearance. It is estimated that more than 50,000 persons have been forcibly disappeared in Syria, including at least 2,000 women. Enforced disappearances of men also severely impact the situation of their female relatives and other women in their communities. Under international law, the family members of disappeared individuals are also considered victims of the crime of enforced disappearance.[9]

In certain areas outside the control of the Syrian government, some armed groups are imposing a new social order which adversely affects the fundamental rights of women. For instance, in 2014 in the region of Raqqa ISIS imposed conservative dress codes on women and prevented them from moving freely in public unless accompanied by a male relative.[10]

The prevailing context of violence in Syria has created an environment ripe for sexual abuses against women. Some cases are reported by psychologists, field workers, and civil society activists, yet many challenges hamper documentation of gender-based violence in Syria.

Rape cases have been documented in Homs, Damascus, Hama, Latakia, Daraa, Idlib and Tartous.[11] The assaults have mainly occurred during military incursions, kidnappings, at checkpoints, and within detention facilities. In fact, fear of being subjected to sexual assault is reported by female refugees as one of the main reasons for seeking asylum outside Syria.

Syrian human rights groups consider that such practices are used to intimidate communities known for their opposition to the Syrian government. As noted by the report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "Rape and other inhumane acts, as crimes against humanity, have been committed by government forces and affiliated militia."[12]

An estimated 2 million women have been internally displaced, while approximately 1.2 million women have fled Syria to seek refuge in neighboring countries.[13] These women find themselves in highly vulnerable situations, exposed to numerous abuses with limited protection and no guarantees for their fundamental rights.

---

[9] The Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power *states that: "The term "victim" also includes, where appropriate, the immediate family or dependents of the direct victim (...)."* UN General Assembly, 29 November 1985

[10] *See* SNHR report *Islamic State of Iraq and Levant Organization (ISIL)* February 2014

[11] *See* EMRHN report "*Violence against women, bleeding wound in the Syrian conflict*", November 2013

[12] *See* Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Syria , June 2013 paragraph 91-95 A/HRC/23/58

[13] *See* UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response (accessed on 15th February, 2014).

Recommendations:

To the Syrian government:

- Abide by international human rights and humanitarian law regarding the protection of women in times of conflict, bearing in mind UN Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), and 1960 (2010), 2122 (2013).
- Grant unhindered access to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria to investigate all human rights violations and crimes committed by all parties to the conflict.

To all parties to the Syrian conflict:

- Abide by IHL, with particular attention to the protection of women.
- Immediately release all hostages and detainees and put an end to arbitrary arrests and abductions of civilians, including women and children.
- Allow international monitoring mechanisms and bodies, in particular the ICRC, unhindered access to all detention facilities.

To the Human Rights Council:

- Clearly and firmly call upon the Security Council to initiate a genuine process of accountability in Syria for perpetrators of international crimes.
- Support Syrian-led transitional justice processes, considering specific needs for rehabilitation and compensation for women.

To the international community:

- Take urgent measures to reinforce mechanisms aimed at providing women who have been exposed to serious violations, including sexual assault, with adequate social, medical, psychological and economic rehabilitation. Extensive efforts should be urgently deployed to target IDPs and refugees, notably at the Syrian border.
- Give priority to asylum cases of Syrian female victims of gender based violence.

---

* Euro Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) Assyrian Human Rights Network (AHRN) Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria (CCSDS) Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies (DCHRS) Etana Press Kurdish Organization for Human Rights in Syria (DAD) Syrian Center for Human Rights (SCHR) Syrian League for Citizenship (SLC) Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC) Syrian Organization for Human Rights - Sawasyah Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.